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A RETURN TO THE DAKOTA LAKE REGION

By FLORENCE MERRIAM BAILEY

(Continued from volume XX, page 178)

V. FROM THE BRIDGE OVER THE COULEE

THE FARMER at whose house I stayed on North Sweetwater offered to take me down the road to the Belgrade Bridge over the Coulee, three miles south, one morning, on his way to town, saying that he almost always saw Ducks in driving across the Bridge, and that they were quite tame, being used to seeing people.

The Coulee was said to meander down across the prairie all the way from Canada, but although that would be only fifty or sixty miles, the map did not fully bear out the statement. At the southern end of its sluggish course it served as a connecting link between the eastern and western lakes of the Sweetwater chain, a few rods west of the Bridge opening into the middle one of the three western lakes, while to the east of the Bridge, by means of interlacing waterways, it completed the chain.

The Bridge, protected by only a narrow hand rail offered an unobstructed view of the narrow Coulee with its bordering cane and marsh grass, that, on the west, wound out past a long point into the lake; on the east, meandering out of sight between high reedy banks. To the north, from horizon to horizon, the view was of prairie grain fields. At the south end of the Bridge, a thicket of willows frequented by Goldfinches made a good screen from which to watch the more wary birds on the water below and to listen to the neighboring songsters. A large cottonwood looking down on the thicket attracted a Baltimore Oriole which might not otherwise have been found there; and when the wind rustled the leaves of the cottonwoods and willows, bringing the fragrance of the wild prairie rose, Song Sparrow, Maryland Yellow-throat, and Yellow Warbler sang blithely, while from the marsh grass beyond came the tinkling *clatter, clatter, clatter* of a Marsh Wren. Meanwhile, Red-winged Blackbirds and other passersby occasionally lit on the Bridge rail for a look about.

A Sora Rail was frequently heard along the marshy border of the Coulee and once when its song came from the high, partly-lodged marsh grass almost under my end of the Bridge, I mechanically whistled the scale after it. Instant response in loud ringing tones surprised me so that, without stopping to think, I craned eagerly forward over the Bridge, projecting my shadow over the marsh—a bad break for an old observer! Again I whistled, but there was no response, and the next song was well down the Coulee. Not until I had recrossed the Bridge on leaving did the loud clear scale come again in the same place, and never on any of my subsequent visits was I able to see that disillusioned Sora.

A few yards from the Sora's hiding ground, one day, I found the Yellow Warblers feeding young. The father of the family, with strong reddish breast streakings flew up into a conspicuous position on a dead willow where he sang loudly, trying to hold my attention while his duller mate, with food in her bill, flew in the direction of small voices down among the roadside weeds. Near the singing station of the Warbler, in a dead bush, two male Cowbirds faced each other, shining, glossy, and respectable looking in spite of their bad family reputation. Going on with an interrupted conversation, perhaps, they pointed their bills skyward, making themselves look very thin and sleek.

Passing Ducks, now a handsome Mallard, Shoveller, or Blue-winged Teal, occasionally dropped into the Coulee, a Black-crowned Night Heron flew over with neck drawn in, a Marsh Hawk pursued by a Redwing hurried by with a flash of white rump and red epaulettes, Black Terns skimmed past, and twittering Barn Swallows with their steely backs and buffy underparts swung around under the Bridge and over the water, in and out and round about.

There were so few passersby on this prairie Bridge ten miles from town that it proved an excellent observation station, and after discovering this, when not engrossed by birds in the sloughs, I came down to take advantage of what it offered. During my visits, at rare intervals I had to pick up my camp stool and shrink back into the willows, once to let some four horse grain wagons pass. Some days no one came to disturb me, and one morning during a two hour vigil only two passersby came, the crippled Rural Route mail carrier with his old white horse and bulging bags and a virile youth whose automobile was heard far across the prairie and who, bare-headed, flashed past full of the enjoyment of racing over the big prairies.

The only foot passengers were a family of pretty young "flicker-tails" which came up from their hole at my end of the Bridge and used the smooth level boulevard as a playground. One touched my foot as he came up through the grass, one day, and then calmly taking his stand about six feet from me where his bright eyes, spotted back, and sandy underparts could clearly be seen, bent over and taking his head in his paws, proceeded with a cat-like bath. While so engaged, a young brother came up, and with a slap of the paw they were off, scampering down the length of the Bridge, tails flickering. On the way back they sobered up enough to stop now and then and stand up on their hind legs, stretching up on tip toe to see better. Once when they had chased noisily down the Bridge past me, one of the pair came back inquisitively, and standing up close in front of me, calmly looked me over.

From the raised platform of the Bridge I looked down on the birds of the Coulee and got delightful hints of family histories unguessed before. In the sloughs, day after day, the gray Coots had run to cover before me, and when

at last by deep wading I had discovered a colony of nests the parents had already disappeared—the slough curtain had been dropped before my face. But from the vantage of the Coulee Bridge, I looked down on the birds pursuing their natural avocations largely unconscious of observation. The relief was so great that coulees, bridges, and high banks became my desiderata for the rest of the season.

Looking down on the Coulee to the west of the Bridge, only about a week after my discovery of the Coots' nests, I saw a gray, white-billed parent Coot swim out from the cane and marsh grass of the opposite bank and start across the water followed one by one by a long file of droll little red-headed, black-bodied young ones like the nestling I had put back among its brother eggs in its nest. With riveted gaze I joyfully counted eight of the swimmers, and afterwards when they recrossed the channel, one more had been added to the brood.

Three days later I was fortunate enough to find what I took to be two parents feeding their brood on the east side of the Coulee. That the two adults were parents of the one brood I inferred from seeing them together before I discovered the young, and finally seeing them all swim about together. When first seen the old Coots were crossing to the marsh vegetation on my side of the Coulee, possibly to see if they might better bring the young across to feed them; but after a few moments both returned, one swimming against the wind with head lowered. The north side of the Coulee was so well lit by the morning sun that I could see the small Red Tops swim through the wind-made arches of marsh grass, and when they were rejoined by their parents and divided into two squads, could watch them being slowly led up and down the edge of the Coulee; now outside, in sight—when I saw a parent dig around at the root of a cane—now in the cane labyrinth hidden from view, while the parents fed them. After working along different beats for a time, the parents led their broods up toward each other, but then as if realizing that it was easier to feed each little group by itself, turned and swam off in opposite directions. One parent who was followed by three young had a nervous air as if new to such responsibilities for little mouths, and led the ducklings along with its quick *pep', pep'*, picking rapidly from the surface of the water, one side and then the other, turning back to let its small followers take the food from its bill.

A week later, on my third visit, I spent an hour and a half at the Bridge watching the Coots feed their young. As before, if my inference were correct, the two parents were taking care of separate squads. This morning instead of picking up tiny water plants from the surface, they got the food mainly under water, sometimes merely putting the head under and making dabs at the weeds, and sometimes diving for them. One parent—the mother, let us say—when followed a yard or two behind by two Red Tops dived and turned around under water coming up facing the other way to meet the laggards. I could see their red sealing wax bills open for the food held out to them. The mother may have been diving deeper than usual, for she would actually hop up out of the water so that her long legs showed, and then, pointing down her bill as a boy puts his hands together in diving from a height, would disappear below. When the bubbles rose over her, the young which had followed her would swim back to the protection of the canes and wait. When she reappeared they would swim out to her or she would swim back to them. Sometimes they would be so near that she merely reached back to them. She once gave one a piece of fila-

mentous water plant that suggested fine green seaweed, and waiting to see if the little fellow could manage it, finally helped him out with it. When one Red Top had had his portion, sometimes another would come up to take his turn, and once two of the quaint little Cootlings came together to swim close to their mother's bill. Several times when fed they dropped part of what she had given them and she had to reach down and pick it up for them. A pretty picture she made when reaching around one by her side to feed him—as if she were putting a motherly arm around him.

But the most interesting thing I saw was when she was diving a few feet out from the bank. Several times as she started away from the brood, one of the small Red Tops climbed up on her back for a ride. When he had gone far enough, she would rise and give a shake, and off he would go; whereupon she would dive and he would swim back to the bank. When both parents started to swim across the Coulee at one time, the rear one had a youngster on his back; and in the same way, when part way across, the small rider was quietly unseated.

The parent which I imagined to be the father—down the canes a few rods—went out and dived several times and when his followers did not appear, ate what he had brought, himself; though later he dutifully hunted them up to feed them. After a time, however, when the mother, if it were she, was diving by the shore, the father, if it were he, swam off alone across the Coulee to take a well-earned rest.

Meanwhile a young Coot, doubtless belonging to another brood, as it had lost most of the red of the head and was larger than those I had been watching, on seeing a motherly looking Duck swim by, started to follow; upon which the old Coot who was still patrolling the shore immediately swam down the line of canes and recalled all straying nestlings. That she was patrolling the shore and teaching caution was very evident. When a familiar Duck flew close overhead no one paid any attention, but when a strange hoarse note—probably from a Holboell Grebe—was heard, the young promptly disappeared in the canes. And when a Marsh Hawk flew over calling, the mother made a pertinent remark that apparently kept the brood close to the protecting cover, while she swam outside looking carefully both ways. When a red necked Holboell came up from below on her side of the Bridge, she eyed him intently, swimming alongside the canes with her brood till entirely satisfied. When a Bittern with wide brown wings flapped low across the water, the Coulee was suddenly bare of all inhabitants, and I inferred that he was an unusual visitor.

The Grebe which excited the scrutiny of the mother Coot, was seen two or three times from the Bridge, and its *cluck* was given as it came up from below, its black crown so wet that it flattened widely. Beside its *cluck* its "crow note" was heard once. In preening it leaned over showing the characteristic white Grebe breast, and when it went below, large ripples circled out from its vanishing point. It was probably a visitor from the west Sweetwater lakes, for when I saw it last it was swimming down the Coulee toward the lake. As it swam it helped itself in the familiar manner, moving its neck back and forth.

While the Coulee was bare, one day, two small Grebes with the pointed crests and gentle ways of the Eared came up from below and swam along side by side, a line of light running down their wake over the water. Looking just alike, diving simultaneously, coming up nearly together and swimming so close together that they made the point of a wedge for one ripping wake, they sug-

gested a pair of twins. As I was watching them, the horse of the Rural Route mail carrier came jogging along over the Bridge and they disappeared—every one in sight on the Coulee disappeared. When I had taken the farm mail and the carrier surrounded by his bags had gone on, the Coot was the first to reappear, but then from under the Bridge, side by side came the twins, crests up; most attractive little creatures.

In the Stony Point Bay I watched a pair one day swimming around among the canes. The two chums, like the pair seen under the Bridge, swam close together, dived together, and came up together. When the inseparables did get separated for a moment, the one in sight called and looked around nervously, then took a short cut through a cane projection to a bay where it found its missing mate; after which they swam back to their starting point, diving leisurely as they came.

The quiet Eared Grebes were a decided contrast to a pair of cocky little Horned Grebes also seen from the Bridge. The first time I looked down on one of them with his small head, short-pointed bill, and puffy black cheeks, the wind was blowing so hard that the feathers of his light side crests were blown about and he turned nervously from side to side. At my next visit I found him out in the middle of the Coulee by himself, absorbed in pluming and diving. When he came up wet, he would rise above the water and give a droll little forward shake of his body as if on purpose to fluff out the pretty side crests. Sometimes the fluffing would go so far that the black wedge of the crown between the light brown crests would be reduced to a line. As he sat on the water below me, I could see his red eye through the glass, as well as his reddish brown throat and side, and his black back. When he turned and lay on his side the beautiful white Grebe breast shone out as a good distant recognition mark, and he could also be recognized by the adept Grebe way of turning head over bill and vanishing below.

A few days later the cocky little Horned Grebe was feeding in the Coulee throughout the two hours that I spent on the Bridge above. As he came up from feeding below, he would plume his feathers, stretch a wing so that the white patch showed, and sometimes rise and flap both wings. As his crests dried, they looked silvery gray. Before I left he was joined by his mate who I imagined had just come from her nest. But as they were a second pair of twins, I could only judge by inference that as he had already attended to his toilet it must be she who now dipped and plumed and stretched a wing till a webbed foot showed behind.

As I watched them, a Duck flew up the Coulee disappearing around a bend. Then thunder broke from the clouds that had been gathering, and I started for the farmhouse three miles away. As the thunder rolled nearer, instead of conscientiously keeping outside the squares of wheat or following dead furrows where footfalls do no harm, with humble apologies to the farmers, I took short cuts across the growing grain. But even so the storm burst over my head, the rain quickly drenching me and the lightning flashing around me. Some children, pulling mustard in the wheat fields had also been caught, and as I neared the farmhouse I saw the farmer standing in the storm violently waving them to hurry home. Afterwards a friend who had been remonstrating with me about wading in the sloughs, quoted statistics regarding the number of people killed annually on the treeless prairies of North Dakota, ending by admonishing me never to be caught out in another thunder storm! So,

thereafter, before making my trips to the Bridge, I scrupulously noted both wind and weather. There was no use going, as I discovered after some fruitless six mile walks, if the wind were either east or west, for in those cases it swept the Coulee bare.

On one day when all the conditions were favorable, I found the Coulee on the west side of the Bridge occupied by Ruddy Ducks, the most individual and interesting of Ducks. The Ruddy might have been developed solely for the comfort of beginners tired of wrestling with obscure species. Signs hang all over him proclaiming his name. In profile he is a chunky little reddish brown tub of a Duck, with head and spike tail up at angles. His white cheek patch is a sign that all who run may read, and when he turns to swim away, the white under coverts of his upraised, uniquely-spiked fan tail label him again. But when he turns full face with the sun on him, his bright blue bill resting on his puffy ruddy breast is so striking that it seems almost unbelievable. A Duck with an Alice blue bill seems the height of absurdity! A detail decoration of this already overdone figure is added when his wet parted crown feathers stand up as two black-pointed crests above his blue bill!

Five handsome Ruddy drakes and a number of nondescript dingy brown ducks were on the Coulee, and from the Bridge I watched them for an hour or so, fascinated by the animated courtship play of the drakes, strikingly ruddy in the sun. When I arrived only two pairs were in evidence, the puffy little drakes looking very cocky and belligerent, suggesting pouter doves with their air of importance and the curious muscular efforts by which they produced their strange notes. When I first saw one perform, not knowing about his tracheal air-sac I thought he might be picking at his breast or have something stuck in his throat and be choking. With quick nods of the head that jerked the chin in, he pumped up and down, till finally a harsh guttural cluck was emitted from his smooth blue bill. Often in doing chin exercises the little drakes pumped up a labored *ip-ip-ip-ip—cluck, cluck'*, producing it with such effort that the vertical tail pressed forward over the back, as if to help in the expulsion, afterwards springing erect again.

Once a drake faced a duck about a yard from him and did his chin exercises and gave his raucous cluck as if definitely addressing her, but usually the performance was for the benefit of a rival. In one case two drakes faced each other a yard or so apart, and after nodding and jerking and clucking, with the feathers of their backs bristled up, swam at each other, such a violent chase ensuing that at the end the pursued dived to escape the pursuer. When no rivals were near, the drakes would sometimes make a noisy rush through the water—rising and paddling rapidly as if from pure excess of animal spirits.

There were soon three pairs of Ruddies on the scene, or rather three ducks and three drakes, for courtship was by no means over. As the action progressed, it became so rapid and complicated that it was hard to keep track of individuals and judge the merits of the case. When greatly excited the drakes would swim around with heads back and spike tails thrown forward till head and tail nearly met, their pose suggesting the courtship attitudinizing of Marsh Wrens; but when chasing each other with backs bristled up, an especially bellicose appearance was given by their swimming low with spike tails pressing the water, when they would rush along with a noise suggesting castanets.

Meanwhile the brown ducks, for the most part, swam along the edge of the Coulee, feeding or bathing as if quite indifferent to the play going on be-

fore them; and when the drakes joined them, they all swam around in prosaic unemotional fashion. One of the ducks, however, had been singled out and apparently won, for she was certainly being championed most vigorously. But, as if she were a prime favorite whose suitors could not give her up, her lord, whom I dubbed Lord of the Fray, went about with the proprietary airs of one whose possessions are disputed. When other drakes were near, he swam close beside her, getting her rapidly out of the way, and when perhaps a rejected suitor swam in toward her, chased him back with a decided air of "This is *my* mate, I'd have you know!" When matters were comparatively quiet, the Lord of the Fray having properly disciplined all the drakes on the west side of the Bridge, from the east side, swimming in under the Bridge, came a fourth drake, and with the appearance of an ardent suitor, swam straight toward the much disputed lady. At this the infuriated Lord of the Fray bristled up, put his head down and swam at the interloper so hard he had to dive, ignominiously. When he finally came up he hung around for a while, but was so persistently snubbed that he soon swam back to his own side of the Coulee. It was altogether a most amusing comedy, but after all, why should we laugh when the unconscious players were merely puppets in Nature's hands as she worked out the great law of monogamy?

While the Ruddies were engaged in their jousting, though a Shoveller flew down with his *chuck-ah*, a Marsh Hawk beat over the tules, and a Crow passed nagged by a Redwing, nobody paid any attention; the pre-occupied Ducks ignoring them as completely as they did the ecstatic outbursts of the Sora from the high grass beneath the Bridge. This was on July 1. On July 3, although there was such a strong east wind that the large lake on the east of the road was angry with white-capped rollers, two Ruddy drakes were swimming along the Coulee. So peaceable were they, I could but conclude that courtship rivalries were over and their brown mates were inside the marsh, happily engaged in nest making. When a Shoveller and a Blue-winged Teal swam up the Coulee close to one of the Ruddies, he never turned a feather. The Law of the Family had been established. A Ruddy drake that I saw on July 6 swam out from under the Bridge, back ruffed up and tail down as if ready for the fray; but as no one came, he put up his tail, did chin exercises and clucked to himself, or—perhaps a brown dame was within hearing inside the canes.

Soon after this I started on my visits to other lakes, but late in August, I revisited the Bridge. With a strong west wind there was little to be seen on the sparkling water of the Coulee, but a sudden rapturous burst of song came from a Sora, probably the very one that had answered me by mistake earlier in the summer. The Yellow Warbler and Song Sparrow piped up as in June, but the cane bordering the Coulee had grown much higher, and brown topping plumes waved in the wind. A flock of Blue-wings flew rapidly by, and a solitary Shoveller, perhaps from a belated nest, lit on the water. At a sudden *plunk* at the end of the Bridge below me, I peered down discovering the head of a swimming muskrat. Its nose was well up out of the water, and I could see its hairy back and long ratty tail as it swam. But just then it dived under the Bridge, and was seen no more.

As I listened, a new sound was heard—the *thud, thud, thud* of a threshing machine in a wheat field beyond. Belching out straw, it was rapidly building up a high straw stack. Sheaves still standing, bundles being loaded onto some of the wagons, and carried up to the machine by others, made a busy scene. A

few days later—August 26—in crossing the Bridge again I happened on the concluding chapter of the Ruddies' history—a mother Ruddy leading five tiny ducklings up the Coulee—so, in spite of its unavoidable gaps, my Bridge work came to a satisfactory conclusion.

In following the marsh-bordered windings of the Coulee from the Bridge to the northeast, one day, I came to a small open lake, evidently connected with the Coulee in high water, over which two white Terns and a large white Gull were hunting. Commanding the lake was a brushy ridge probably used for hunting cover as the Ducks were hopelessly wild. When I appeared in sight a flock of perhaps a hundred Scaups rose, and soon after all stragglers of whatever kind departed. Beyond the lake, as I followed a cow path overlooking the Coulee and the adjoining pastures, filled with horses and cattle, an old Norwegian woman having a handkerchief tied over her head, and wearing a foreign looking cloth jacket and a big blue apron, came laboriously trudging up the path toward me, followed by two dogs. The dogs, like some of the horses and children I met in my unfamiliar field costume, completed by camp stool and glass, shrank away afraid of me, but the weary old woman, after our greeting, motioned me to open my camp stool for her to rest. When I questioned her about the waterways in sight she pointed to the Coulee and making bends above and below, said "Lak, lak", going on in Norwegian with explanations that were lost on me.

Farther north, three miles east of the farmhouse across the prairie, and near the family tree claim, as I discovered later, was a second Bridge over the Coulee, and one afternoon about the middle of July, taking a child with me, I drove over in the family two-wheeled cart. As we approached, no water was in sight, but the high black frame of the iron Bridge loomed up from the surrounding greenness. A grass grown road led to it and the Bridge floor itself was earthed and green. "No automobiles go over that road once in six months" I had been assured when told to hitch old Polly to the Bridge—no fence being within reach—and I could well believe it when looking up the dim road beyond to the farmhouse on the horizon.

A flock of pretty little Bank Swallows almost flew into us at the end of the Bridge as if surprised by our presence, and fluttered and hesitated so close to us that the dusky bands on the white breasts were conspicuous. Barn Swallows were flying about the Bridge, now over, now under, and small voices from below us hinted that they were feeding young in safe niches of the foundation. A pedestrian—a Franklin ground squirrel, quite different from the "flicker-tail" in having a dark back and long tail, came trotting across the Bridge with pretty confidence.

Though the Coulee was here on its way down to the second Bridge, its current was so sluggish that it seemed to end in the green marsh grass. Coots had splashed away through the green on our approach and through the water weeds I could just make out a blackish head stretched cautiously around a bend of cane. Along the borders of narrow waterways glimpses were had of other swimmers, and once I caught sight of the snaky head of a Pied-billed Grebe, my first in several years, but it quickly dived and did not reappear. A brown Bittern rose from the edge of the canes and flew away, a pair of Black Terns were evidently feeding young in the marsh, one of them with food in its bill hesitating and scolding over our heads. Yellow-headed Blackbirds and Red-wings were also apparently feeding young, the Yellow-heads going down again

and again in the same places in the canes, near which they clung to stalks and emitted their strange notes, their Red-headed Woodpecker *kar'r'r* and their Redwing *karrowe'* and *kerrup*. Maryland Yellowthroats were singing and the scale of the Sora came up from various parts of the marsh. In a mass of green at the end of the Bridge I caught sight of a mite of a Marsh Wren atilt of a stalk, singing a squeaky little song, *clack, clack-ah, clack-ah, clack* that changed to a scolding chatter as he watched us—*cha-cha-cha-cha-cha, cha*. But best of all were the loud joyous songs of the two Bobolinks, the Bobolink of the Meadows, and the Bobolink of the Sloughs.

From the water below us came the unmistakable throaty pumping of the Ruddy—*ip-ip-ip-ip-ip-ip—cluck'*, *ip-ip-ip-ip-ip-ip—cluck'*. Absurd, self-important little chap! At the flat *tub'* of a Coot, Ruddy bridled, sat up, pumped, and clucked again. He was so close below and apparently so fearless that I forgot everything but my pleasure and interest in finding him there, and, off guard, must have moved, for, dropping his cocky air, he hurriedly started for shore, diving and swimming under water, coming up only to dive again. My little companion, greatly impressed by the field glass she held in her hand asked eagerly. "You can't see him through the water, diving, *with this here*, can you?"

As I gazed down from the Bridge over the narrow waterways through the green, looking for swimmers, a handsome yellow and black snake pulled himself sinuously across the Coulee. Beautiful tree-like water weeds standing in the stream bed and reaching up to the sunlit surface looked like golden filaments. On the opposite side of the Bridge, the knightly spears of tall Sagittarias rose above the water, while hair-like masses of weed lay on the surface garlanded with delicate flowers as if decorating the brows of some floating Elaine. Small blue dragon flies resting on the water weeds, large gauzy black-banded ones flying above, and exquisite orange-colored gauzy wings alighting on the Bridge, birds of the air flying about freely overhead, birds of the water swimming secretly through the mazes below, made a fascinating scene.

Over the Bridge-framed pictures of green fields and white clouds, the lights and shades shifted, with developing charm of color. With the sun under a cloud, the wheat fields were a dull green; as the clouds broke away at the edges, long streaks of light illumined the prairies; and when the last clouds melted away the whole broad landscape was flooded with warm yellow light. After watching the birds for a long time in their setting, the peace and beauty of that setting gradually dominated all the rest.

A strange Bridge it seemed—no link in the noisy traffic of the world, but merely a green-carpeted span across a green-veiled waterway, idling between green farm lands, winding around reedy bends and losing itself in marshy meadow borders; the only sounds coming from it, the buzzing of insects and the call of birds, as the sweet air of the prairie breathed quietly over it. No intrusive discordant elements of world traffic could enter here—no shrieking boat whistles, no rattling railroad trains. Away to the horizon stretched the green blanket, so far that, as you gazed, you felt the convexity of the great prairie—windmill sails on one horizon, houses half hid in wheat on the other. Even the untutored child at my side was impressed by it, asking incredulously, "Ain't there *no end* to the world?"

(To be continued)